



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### What, or When, is Interiors?

**Citation for published version:**

Hollis, E 2017, 'What, or When, is Interiors?', *Interiors: Design, Architecture and Culture*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2017.1323413>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/20419112.2017.1323413](https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2017.1323413)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Interiors: Design, Architecture and Culture

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## WHAT, OR WHEN, IS INTERIORS?

In December 2013, interiors designed by the Lyons architecture practice Dank caused a minor flurry on the pages of *Dezeen*. Or, at least, the photographs they'd taken of them did.

The idea for these images had come to the architects after they had paid their clients a visit in their completed flat, and had found "a complete mess, with empty bottles of Champagne on the table and wrapping paper all over the floor" (Frearson, A. 2013)

Rather than tidying the place up, Dank decided to recreate the mess for the photoshoot they had planned for the property. Rather than the pristine state usual in most architectural images, the photographs they sent to *Dezeen* showed the flat in three states: all laid out for a dinner party, with tea lights lit on a table laid for a meal; with the party in progress – the space animated by figures blurred in movement; and the morning after, with the remaining survivors slumped on the sofa.

Reactions were mixed. 'Concerned citizen' found the photos 'a distraction from the design' (Frearson, A. 2013) while 'LOW' felt that the conceit had not been taken far enough: 'I don't think any of the people involved in this have had a proper house party.' (Frearson, A. 2013) 'Robert' found the whole thing rather too staged: 'There is something about the way that the party string has been placed carefully on the banister that is very off-putting' (Frearson, A. 2013) while 'Jorrs' asked: 'Haven't Ikea done this 9999999999 times already?' (Frearson, A. 2013)

It was a mild-mannered joke, played on - and about - the carefully styled pages of *Dezeen* (or the IKEA catalogue), but it's a telling one, too, about the ways in which we, as both producers and consumers of interiors imagine them. In this paper, I shall explore how this media flurry can help us think about an answer to the odd grammar of the question that this journal poses: what is interiors?

\*\*\*

Recent academic discourse has favoured a view of interiors as, as the very word (a plural adjective curiously used as a singular noun) suggests: a plural, inclusive and open-ended discipline. Much writing (the author's included) has argued that interiors themselves are plural, inclusive and open-ended things too - if things they are at all.

Brooker and Stone's *Re-readings* (2004) or Fred Scott's *On Altering Architecture* (2007) position works of interior architecture as altered states and state of alterations: classic examples of the postmodern open work. Drawing on curatorial theory and Elizabeth Grosz' readings of Deleuze, Susie Attiwill's writing (2013) decentres the interior as a 'thing', talking instead of a process of 'interiorisation' that sets interiors and the subjects that inhabit them in temporal and temporary

relationships. Historians like John Potvin (2014) write about the construction (and loss) of domestic interiors in the context of the construction (and loss) of historical, sexual, and personal identities – as processes rather than products, or things.

But unfashionable and ungrammatical as it may be to say so, a singular thing interiors stubbornly remains. The fact that we make beds, lay tables or arrange mantelpieces at all implies that we are making some *thing*, even if it is plural, inclusive and open-ended sort of thing. The fact that, on the ground, we think we know what we are doing when we are doing it implies that the, as Shashi Caan, for example, argues there is a singular sort of knowledge that it embodies:

*...all design disciplines share certain skills. But I am also very aware of the fact that what they are concerned with is not necessarily interchangeable...to meet the challenges we face, these disciplines need a better foundation upon which to build ...interiors have an important role to play in leading the way toward developing the core body of knowledge that will inform all design practice...*  
(Caan 2011: 8)

The development of that ‘core body of knowledge’ is no simple matter. As Joanne Cys notes in her paper *Developing a Discipline: Interior Design Education and Research* ‘much interior design knowledge is silent, being undocumented, unwritten, and unpublished’ (Cys 2013: 64) From what, among that samizdat discourse might we derive a core body of knowledge to ‘meet the challenges we face’?

\*\*\*

We might start with the curious word itself: *interiors*. In *The Emergence of the Interior* Charles Rice explains its etymology:

*The interior...emerges as a physical, three-dimensional space, as well as an image, whether it be a two dimensional representation such as a painting, a print in a portfolio of decoration, or a flat backdrop that could conjure up as a theatrical scene. This image-based sense also encompasses a reverie or imaginal picture...which could transform an existing spatial interior into something other. Significantly, doubleness involves the interdependence between image and space, with neither sense being primary*  
(Rice 2006: 2)

It is this conception of interiors as both discipline and thing, as both space) plural, inclusive, and open ended) and (singular) image that I wish to explore in this essay.

\*\*\*

Of all the images that provoked the readers of *Dezeen*, the most provocative were those that showed the morning after. This should be surprising to any historian or theorist of the interiors, for these images followed a well-trodden path that leads all the way back to Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum that

*To inhabit means to leave traces. In the interior these traces are accentuated. Coverings and protective shields, all sorts of cases and covers are invented, in which the traces of objects in daily use are disguised. In the interior even the traces of the inhabitant are covered. The detective novel is born, which sets out to search for these traces...the guilty parties in the first detective novels are not gentlemen nor apaches, but bourgeois private citizens.*  
(Walter Benjamin, quoted in Praz 1949: 29)

And of course, the interior as both space and image may seem, on the face of it to make most sense in retrospect. Interiors, once styled and perfected, once photographed and stuck on the cover of a magazine, become images. It is an irony: they resolve themselves into legible images just as spatiality (and therefore everyday use) disappears from them and they are confined to the two dimensions of the page.

But the same thing happens in three dimensions, too. In the period room, with its red rope and its solicitous attendant, there will be no-one to crumple the sheets, or spill wine on the table cloth, to disturb the image that is both an image of the interior and the interior itself.

‘Why, among the apartments I once visited’ asked Mario Praz, in the introduction to *La Filosofia D’Arredamento*

*do I recall the most sequestered and funereal? Is it perhaps because they seem most in key with the ruin that has engulfed them? And yet I have seen gay apartments, their gaiety, of course, tempered and veiled, for the fragrance of the past everywhere links the beautiful to the sad.*  
(Praz 1949: 36)

He provides the answer himself: the interior, he writes, becomes “a museum of the soul, an archive of its experiences; it reads in them its own history” (Praz 1949: 24). That is to say that the interior, fixed as both space and image, can, on the face of it only refer to the past.

\*\*\*

But Dank didn’t just show the aftermath of their party. They also took photographs that showed the room before the guests had arrived, when the candles were lit, the cushions flouped, and everything looked perfect. And these images remind us that time’s arrow can point forward too, towards a future in which the guests will arrive and sit down at the table.

For while much conventional discourse, following Benjamin, discusses interiors (as both space and image) as trace, they are often precisely the reverse: imaginations and anticipations. Consider the covers of interiors magazines, or rooms in showhomes, in which the table is laid for a meal that is never eaten: their stasis is

the stasis of a room in which something is about to happen, rather than one in which something has happened.

This is, of course, the way that designers (rather than scholars or historians, or journalists, or photographers) of the interior must work with interiors as both space and image, for while they may be dealing with buildings or objects donated to them by the caprices of the past, their work is to think not in retrospect but in anticipation. For the designer, the placement of furniture and the colouring of walls, the hanging of lights and the arrangement of ornaments are not traces of an occupation that has already happened, but point towards of what has not yet happened.

And in this sense, Benjamin's dictum about living and traces, detective novels and guilty parties is inverted. Interiors are not clues about what has passed, but cues for what will, or perhaps more accurately, should happen. As the occupants of a designed interior, it is our role, as detectives, to discover, by enacting the interiors in which we find ourselves, what its creator's intentions for it might have been.

Mario Praz describes the situation beautifully in describing a watercolour he had found of the boudoir of Caroline Murat, Queen of Naples.

*Crystalline in its clarity, the room awaiting its inhabitants is eloquent and moving: the more so because we possess the text of the drama that unfolded there, reported to us by contemporaries.*

(Praz 1949: 44)

But Praz, the storyteller tells us: of the deposition of the king and queen, and their hurried valediction to the room, the palace, the city, and their kingdom, and ultimately, the firing squad. But of the drama itself the image (and therefore the interior) itself, tells us nothing: it is a still image, that is all.

\*\*\*

In between the two states of immobility, in which the interior is an image – either retrospective or anticipatory - lies the action itself, during which time the interior becomes invisible. For interiors as both space and image the time of occupation is a moment of eclipse, during which a sign: 'do not disturb', 'meeting in progress', 'engaged' tells us both that something is happening in there, and that we are denied entry or sight.

During this time of action interiors may be as a collage of affects, but because action happens in time, it is impossible to fully record or imagine as a still image. In Dank's images of their party in progress, for example, the figures are motion blurred as they move around the space, and the images, as a result, remain unresolved.

Praz, in reflecting on his watercolour of the boudoir of Caroline Murat, points to the way in which the still image of the room frames, in time, the events that took place in it:

*The inhabitants of that room have long since gone to their deaths: one of them dies violently under the bullets of a firing squad. Next to the door of the room the key is still hanging, as if the master had only left it there a moment ago, and the bell rope is waiting for a hand to pull it. But in vain. Of the magnificent furnishings nothing is left to day within those walls....*

(Praz 1949: 45)

In the image, the two temporal conditions of retrospect and anticipation are caught in perfect balance and thus made timeless:

*'It is a scene of eternal Elysium, but the miniaturist has been so precise in painting them [the elements of the interior] that if I came upon them today in a museum, in private collection, or at a dealer's I would recognize them.*

(Praz 1949: 45)

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argues that photographs of people – especially historical photographs – often contain this strange pivotal balance between memory and anticipation:

*In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die: I shudder... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.*

(Barthes 1981: 96)

To attempt to fix 'life' in an image is impossible. Instead, one can only hope to enclose it in the pincer like grasp between the futurity and the pastness of a picture. If that is true of something that's true of people – and how much more so of the interior which, if we are to believe Rice, is both space and image: both an evanescent uncapturable thing, and the attempt to fix it in watercolour, silver nitrate, or liquid crystal.

\*\*\*

Such an attempt will always be an artifice; and many of the comments on Dank's images referred to their inauthentic quality. How could the interior, as both space and image, not be staged?

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 2004) uses a debate between Plato and Aristotle to discuss two modes of memory. On the one hand, he argues, memory is the act of recollection – the retrieval of things that already exist in the mind. Such an art of memory is backward looking, and, ostensibly, transparent. On the other hand, memory involves the imagination. When we remember things, we construct, in our minds, images of the past. We like to tell ourselves that such images are mere reconstructions, but are in fact images with a life of their own, independent of the 'thing that has been 're-membered.'

Ricoeur notes, in the tension between these two conceptions of memory, a paradox about truth:

*The constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of the faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory. And yet...*

*And yet, we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it....*

(Ricoeur 2004: 7)

Translate this to the discourse of the interior as space and image. On the one hand we have the watercolour of the ancient room filled with collected objects: the decorated domestic interior. On the other we have the rendering of a room that does not yet exist, or which does exist, but has not yet been inhabited: the interior of the designer). They are both forms of memory – one recollection, one the work of imagination. Slipped almost invisibly between the two is the interior itself, in use, in time.

Translate this to the relationship between theory and practice, we can see a similar relationship emerging. We often imagine that the practice of interiors is imaginative, and future or production oriented. Conversely, we often imagine that history and theory are retrospective, involving the transparent recollection of the past. Both deal with images, but the images work, temporally, in opposite directions. Both deal with memory in both senses – as the recollection of the existing, and its transformation through the imagination.

Interiors will always be double, if not plural: both image and space, memory and desire, the singular and the plural. This is a grammatical, and a professional issue about which many disagree – in productive, and inventive ways, and this paper has not tried to argue for any resolution of the arguments.

However, it does posit one simple route to the reconciliation of the multiple and the singular: the dimension of time, in which interiors, successively overlaid with imaginings of themselves are changing all the time, at the same time as remaining the same. Perhaps the simplest question we can ask of interiors is not what it is, but when.

## References

Attiwill, Suzie 2013 "Interioriszt" in Brooker G. and Weinthal, L. *The Handbook of Interior Architecture and Design* London: Bloomsbury Academic

Barthes, R. 1981 tr. Howard, R. 1993 *Camera Lucida* London: Vintage

Brooker, G. and Stone, S. 2004 *Re-readings: Interior Architecture and the Design Principles of Remodelling Existing Buildings* London: RIBA

Caan, S. 2008 *Rethinking Design and Interiors: Human Beings in the Built Environment* London: Laurence King

Cys, J. 2013 "Developing a Discipline: Interior Design Education and Research " in Leydecker, S. (ed.) *Designing Interior Architecture* Berlin: De Gruyter

Frearson, A. "Garden flat in Lyon photographed before and after a party" *Dezeen* (1 December 2013) <https://www.dezeen.com/tag/dank-architectes/> (accessed 1 February 2017)

Potvin, J. 2014 *Bachelors of a Different Sort* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Praz, M. 1949, tr. Weaver, W. 1982 *An Illustrated History of Interior Decoration: from Pompeii to Art Nouveau* London: Thames and Hudson

Rice, C. 2006 *The Emergence of the Interior* Oxford: Routledge

Ricoeur, P. tr. Blarney, K. & Pellauer, D. 2004 *Memory, History, Forgetting* London; University of Chicago Press

Scott, F. 2007 *On Altering Architecture* Oxford: Routledge